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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the culturization of body image and the impact of body image on women and men, noting that the strict definition of body size has made many women and men dissatisfied with their bodies. The first section defines body image and culturization, explaining how the current media images put tremendous pressure on men and women that was less present throughout history. The second section examines historical changes in body image, noting that historically, the standard for beauty in women and men has varied significantly. The third section discusses the importance of a good body image and how it relates to overall self-esteem and self-confidence. The fourth section focuses on body image distortion, explaining that a distorted body image means that the individual perceives him or herself to weigh more or be larger than actual measurements. The fifth section presents practical implications, in the form of questions and answers, related to losing weight, self-esteem, dieting, fat consumption, reasons to measure weight or percent fat, and improving body image. (Contains 29 references.) (SM)

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Workshop on Body Image: Creating or Reinventing a Positive Body Image

Conference Proceedings from the Native American Women and Men's Wellness II Conference February 28-March 4, 1999 San Diego, CA

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Workshop on Body Image: Creating or Reinventing a Positive Body Image

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Abstract

Issues of body image in women and men are presented. Definition of body image, culturization of body image, historical changes in body image, importance of body image, and its relationship to eating disorders are reviewed. Misbeliefs about body image are discussed. Practices and recommendations for developing a positive body image in women and men are included.

Introduction

This paper will present a definition of body image and changes in body image throughout history, the importance of a positive body image for women and men, body image distortion and its effect on eating disorders, common misbeliefs about body image. Practices and recommendations for creating a positive body image in women and men are given.

Definition of Body Image and Culturization

Body image is the picture of physical self that is carried in the mind's eye (Melpomene Institute, 1990). This impression can have little resemblance to how a woman or man actually looks or weighs. Body image culturization is the process by which we integrate others' perception with an internal sense of what is an acceptable or ideal

size. It is a value or attitude toward current shape, weight or size that goes beyond pounds or inches. Thomas (1988) reported factors which influence satisfaction with his/her body image to include: physical characteristics, reactions of others to his/her physical self, self comparison to others, and comparisons to cultural ideals. Other influential factors were parents, siblings, friends, coaches and teachers or media.

Kilbourne and Lazurus (1987) have been leaders in publicizing the media culturization of beauty that damages girls' and women's health and body image through films such as "Still Killing Us Softly" and "Slim Hopes." One of their beliefs is that beauty is presented as an unattainable goal to sell products, leading to millions of dollars spent on cosmetics, hair products, and lotions every year. According to Kilbourne and Lazurus (1987), few women have the airbrushed, camera perfect faces or structurally rare bodies of models shown by the media. Large breasts, narrow hips and no stomach is unattainable by 95% of grown women. Media models allow for neither the progression of puberty, the process of childbirth, or the affects of aging (Kilbourne and Lazurus, 1987).

Boys, likewise, see common images of a muscular physique or height that may be unattainable to them genetically. Curiously the current glamorization of thinness is only a phenomena of the last

century. Viewing recent historical figures of beauty may help women and men see how media images of beauty or attractiveness change over time. The current models put tremendous pressure on men and women that was less present throughout history.

Historical Changes in Body Image

Historically, the standard for beauty in women and men has varied dramatically. Thinness was not always a sign of beauty or attractiveness. Examination of artwork throughout history portrays a very different standard of beauty than our current one. According to Bennet and Gurin (1982), the visual arts show us how ideals of men and women have changed in the last 600 years. Early paintings and statues show women with full breasts, curvaceous hips, well developed arms and legs, and large waists with rounded stomachs. Women with full breasts and hips have been admired throughout time because they represented magnificent fertility. Corpulent men were viewed as successful and powerful.

From Victorian times to the present, there has been a shift in the perception of body image. The idealized silhouette of the early 1900's, according to Dosmantes (1992), was the hourglass. In the 1950's a very shapely image appeared- personified by the full hips and breasts of Marilyn Monroe. This image would be considered fat by today's media standard. During the 1970's a more linear, straight

line of fashions with unisex clothing appeared. Dosmantes (1992) believed the ideal body for the 80's and 90's was younger and thinner than in the past. Given the models of beauty women and men are shown today, it may not be easy to have a good body image. How important is it to feel acceptance and satisfaction with one's body?

Importance of Body Image

A good body image would seem to be related to overall self-esteem and self-confidence. What effect does a negative body image have? Some research suggests that dissatisfaction with weight and body image are correlated with eating disorders. In a study by Brodie and Slade (1988), dissatisfaction with body image was related to dieting, bingeing, and emotional problems. An obsession with losing weight takes a person's energy and time from that which could be spent in educational attainment or personal development.

Body Image Distortion

A distorted body image means that the individual perceives him or herself to weigh more or to be larger than actual measurements. Some researchers believe that those with a distorted body image suffer more from eating disorders such as binge-purging (Brown, Cash, and Lewis, 1989). Others say that body image distortion is not a valid discriminator between those with normal eating and those with eating disorders (Gustavson et. al, 1990).

Brodie, Slade, and Riley (1991) argued that everyone, (men, women, and children) overestimates themselves as being fatter without any form of eating disorder or instability.

Practical Implications

Question number one: Will losing weight help the individual feel better about him or herself?

Not necessarily. The assumption is that when women or men feel bad about their body, they need to change the body. Research indicates that weight loss may not change a person's body image. Cash (1994) talked about the concept of phantom fat. Even after weight or fat loss, people still maintain the larger image of themselves. Orbach (1978) wrote about the internal self-concept changes that must take place when women or men gain or lose weight because they attach meaning to fatness and thinness beyond physical pounds. Changes in body image with weight loss is rarely addressed in any weight loss program.

Question number two: Should we recommend those overweight to go on a diet?

In the authors' opinion - No! Dieting can affect individuals emotional wellbeing, and physical health and can set them on a path to repeated failure in weight management.

To demonstrate the emotional effects of dieting, Keys (1950) carried out a study at the University of Minnesota with 36 dieting

young men. They were given vitamins, minerals, protein and reduced calories similar to the liquid diets currently used. During the six months of the study, the young men reported severe emotional side effects including depression, apathy, anti-social feelings, obsession with food, irritability, and feelings of misery. The subjects withdrew from daily activity and social interaction. During the three months of restored eating, the subjects reported feeling extreme hunger and misery until their full weight was restored. Dieting is not only painful, it is unsuccessful.

Clinical research in the last two decades found that 95% of people who lose weight put it back on over a period of time (Wilson, 1984). Keeping weight off seems to evade most individuals on any diet program. Commercial diet programs have had little impact on the over-weight population (Lahmayer & Lewis, 1991). Review of weight loss programs throughout the decades shows that individuals in the most effective treatment combinations lose about one to two pounds a week (Wilson, 1984). Only about five percent of individuals will maintain the weight they lose in any program (Jordan,1982). A decade later, Ornish (1993) summarized the effects of most weight loss programs in this country as dismal.

Many researchers rely on the set point theory to answer why weight seems so difficult to alter. The set point theory suggests that

nature provides a complex mechanism similar to the operation of a thermostat that promotes a constant body weight (Brownell, 1982). The human body shows an increase in efficiency with increasing energy demands or decreasing calorie intake (Booth, 1978). What this means is that people may lose weight on a calorie restricted or low fat diet, but when they deviate from this restriction, they gain the weight back more easily because their body has adjusted to the lower energy intake (Bennet and Gurin, 1982). The next study demonstrated that it is just as difficult to gain weight beyond a person's set point.

Sims (1974) used a group of prisoners to find out how easy it was to go above a person's set point and gain weight. He provided subjects with the food and instructions to gain weight. All but two of the successful gainers had a very difficult time gaining weight by eating enormous amounts of food. One prisoner had to eat 7000 calories each day to maintain the extra fat! All but two of the gainers dropped the weight readily after returning to normal eating habits.

Lahmayer and Lewis (1991) stated that commercial diet programs are having little impact in this country, and the focus of should change to improving eating behavior and promoting regular physical activity. Further, Allan (1994) encouraged women and men to ignore standards for weight and focus on holistic, internally

directed weight maintenance for health reasons, rather than to meet cultural standards of thinness.

Question number three: Isn't fat bad for you?

Fat you eat in your diet - yes, fat on your body - maybe not. Dietary fat has been shown to play a role in development of coronary heart disease, strokes, even certain types of cancer. A study by Ornish, (1993) showed that heart disease could be reversed by reducing fat in the diet, exercising, dealing with stress, and gaining emotional support. Inadvertently, this leads us to wonder if reducing body fat was really that important to improved heart health.

Few would argue today that reducing dietary fat is the most healthy way to go. Many however, view all dietary fat as bad, not realizing that fat is important to the developmental process. Fat runs hormone processes, acts as padding for protection of organs, and is needed for insulation and fertility. Adolescent women begin to store fat in the thighs and stomach for future pregnancy and breast feeding. People are told only of the health risks associated with body fat and not the benefits. Practitioners instead, should focus on the importance of maintaining a comfortable weight. This weight should be one where the individual feels good, has lots of energy and is healthy.

Question number four: Why do we measure weight or percent fat?

For the most part - tradition. Using a scale to measure weight really means nothing in terms of what a body is composed of. Individuals vary tremendously in bone, muscle mass, fluid and fat so that height and weight scales are no better than an estimate, of a healthy weight.

Determining percent fat using skin folds or underwater weighing may be a more accurate measure to tell women approximately how much fat they have on their body, but the interpretation of results is a concern. What is a good percent of fat? Women and men may be given a fat percent without being cautioned that the numbers are only estimates.

According to many textbooks and charts, below 19% in women and 17% in men is considered excellent for health. Bailey (1991), a noted expert in fat and fitness, reports that the average percentage of fat in America for women is 32% and 23% for men; by most charts this is classified as fat or obese. Bailey (1991) indicates that for a woman to drop below 23 percent, it takes special attention to exercise such as that of the athlete. If we are measuring percent fat for health reasons only and not to fit a standard of athletic fitness, then we need numbers that correspond better with increased risk of

cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, or hypertension on charts.

Question number five: What improves body image?

The following are recommendations for Health Educators to use in helping women develop a positive body image:

1. Get moving. Being physically active is a great way to improve body image and boost self confidence. Having a body that feels strong and healthy is a plus regardless of weight (Powers & Erickson, 1986, Melpomene Institute, 1990, Robison, 1997).

2. Find a weight that feels healthy, energetic and capable and stick to it. Those who have fluctuating weights up and down the scale report a greater dissatisfaction with shape, size and body image (Sanford 1984, Thomas, 1991, Jensen, 1994).

3. Eat healthy foods following the food pyramid, eating less fat and sugar, more breads and grains. Concentrate on healthy eating to prevent heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure rather then on decreasing calories or eliminating and restricting foods. Avoid a new diet or self starvation (Ornish, 1993).

4. Find people who will nurture and enjoy the total person as a friend. Focus on intrinsic human value and uniqueness (Melpomene Institute, 1990, Ikelda & Naworski, 1992).

5. Create positive images to replace the negative ones, like "a full figure is beautiful" and "a healthy body is attractive" (Foley & Nicholas, 1993).

6. Find or create models of beauty that expand the range of differences in human bodies and help accept variations of size (Melpomene Institute,1990).

7. Seek professional help from a counselor if body image is painful or if eating and exercise behaviors get out of hand (Bass & Davis, 1994)

8. As a member of society, criticize advertisements that set limitations on beauty and encourage nonstandard models of beauty (Sanford, 1984).

9. Work to tackle the fears and stereotypes which are part of discrimination against people who are different, whether it is in size, age, race, or ability. Avoid fat jokes and making fat a moral issue. (Ikelda & Naworski, 1992).

10. Encourage children to be accepting of their bodies. Look for toys that accurately depict a healthy body size. Work with schools and parents to evaluate the criteria for who is chosen for cheerleading or sports. Support active games that allow participation of all children (Betchel, 1990).

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has attempted to examine the culturization of body image and the impact of body image on women. The strict definition of body size has made many women and men dissatisfied with their bodies. The standard of valuing thinness is very recent. A better goal would be to promote greater tolerance of human variety and acceptance of self (Bennet & Gurin, 1982).

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